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The Director of Central Intelligence  
Washington, D.C. 20505

National Intelligence Council

NIC# 2399-85  
20 May 1985

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence  
Deputy Director of Central Intelligence

THROUGH: Chairman, National Intelligence Council &  
Vice Chairman, National Intelligence Council

FROM: MG Stephen E. Nichols, USA  
National Intelligence Officer for  
General Purpose Forces

SUBJECT: The Numbers Game: The Body Count Deception

1. One of the quickest and most universally accepted ways to compare opposing military forces or to show change in their relative capabilities is by counting the numbers of people involved. If Force A has 120,000 soldiers and Force B has 80,000 soldiers, then clearly, we say, Force B is at a disadvantage. If Force A increases (or decreases) its strength by 20,000 soldiers, then clearly, we say, that is a significant change. These quantitative observations may be indicators of changing military capability or even intent, but they are not necessarily significant by themselves. They invariably instigate authoritative comment from analysts of things military and from the media, but the true military significance of some of these numerical variations is often not very compelling.

2. If, for example, the strength of the 150,000-man People's Army of Viet-Nam (PAVN) in Cambodia drops by 10,000, there is not necessarily a proportional decrease in their combat effectiveness. The change could reflect no more than a transition from rainy season operations to dry season operations when there should be less support required for transportation, maintenance and even medical care in the easier months between monsoons. Despite the decrease in the number of soldiers, the PAVN (along with their PRK allies) would still be operating against their adversaries with the same numbers of divisions and battalions, tanks and howitzers, with no real significant change in their combat capabilities.

3. If, on the other hand, the PAVN strength in Cambodia increases by 10,000 soldiers, that would not be a sufficiently large expansion--6.7%--to give them an overwhelming superiority compared to what their previous strength

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was. But those 10,000 additional soldiers could be in Cambodia to man new radars or serve as crews for additional tanks or artillery or provide increased helicopter support, and changes such as these would be militarily significant far beyond the mere increase in the number of soldiers present.

4. For MBFR purposes we have allowed ourselves to become very much locked in to counting soldiers in the NATO Guidelines Area, even though the numbers by themselves do not tell us much. We should avoid, however, letting ourselves be drawn into protracted, almost theological discussions concerning the "body count" in other areas, such as Cambodia, Afghanistan, Nicaragua and Angola, where the number of soldiers, by itself, is frequently emphasized by some as militarily significant. It is particularly important that we protect our policymakers from this numbers game. Rather we should try to describe changes in terms of capabilities: more tanks, newer helicopters, decreased logistic support. For our policymakers it is more important to know that there are still 11 PAVN divisions in Cambodia than it is to know that 15,000 or 20,000 soldiers have returned from Cambodia to Viet-Nam; or, conversely, that 15,000 or 20,000 additional PAVN soldiers have been sent from Viet-Nam into Cambodia. There could be instances, of course, in which a really significant increase in troop strength would influence combat conditions such as in a mass dismounted attack, e.g., the Iranians in Iraq, the Chinese in Korea. We would have to acknowledge any such huge increase as militarily significant. (Its political significance would also be obvious).

5. It should be noted that our efforts in the intelligence community to keep track of the numbers of soldiers present in areas of operations is very important, indeed essential. Changes in soldier strengths may indicate any number of potential or actual changes in real military capabilities. CIA, DIA and NSA analysts are doing a superb job of keeping track not only of troops, but also of headquarters, weapons, formations, and other systems. Unfortunately, troop strengths are the easiest numbers to add, subtract and explain to interested parties who are not experts. In our assessments, we should resist taking this easy path unless we are prepared to explain to our policymakers (and ourselves) the real significance of those troop strengths in terms of changed military capability.



Stephen E. Nichols

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MEMO FOR: DCI  
DDCI

FROM: NIO/GPF

SUBJECT: The Numbers Game: The Body Count Deception

NIO/GPF:SENichols:lht

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